

Overture to Classis Toronto - February 2023 Meeting of Classis Toronto

Introduction

The 2022 Synod of the CRCNA adopted the following resolution: “That synod affirm that “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A.108 encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex, all of which violate the seventh commandment. In so doing, synod declares this affirmation “an interpretation of [a] confession” (Acts of Synod 1975, p. 603). Therefore, this interpretation has confessional status.” - **Acts of Synod 2022**, p. 922

We believe the confessional status granted to this interpretation should be removed because it presents serious theological, pastoral, and church order problems to the church. In what follows we outline these issues and conclude with an overture to Classis Toronto and Synod 2023.

Issue 1: Church Order

The decision of Synod 2022 incorrectly bases its ‘confessional status’ decision on the report, “*Synodical Pronouncements and the Confessions*” adopted in 1975. This report states that “no synodical decision involving doctrinal or ethical pronouncements is to be considered on a par with the confessions” (*Acts 1975*, p. 598) and that such pronouncements are *subordinate* to the confessions (p. 603; italics added). Regarding interpretations of a confession, the report states: “When a synodical pronouncement is set forth as an interpretation of the confessions, this is its use and function.” (p. 603). That is to say, the “use and function” of an “interpretation of a confession” is just that: an *interpretation* which does not itself attain the status of a confession (as per p. 598).

It is instructive to note that the 1975 report distinguishes between the status of the confessions, which are “*binding* upon all confessing members,” and synodical interpretations which “all office-bearers are expected to *abide by*” (B-1 and B-2, p. 603; italics added). The spirit and aim of the 1975 report was to create as broad a basis for Christian unity as possible rather than narrowing the scope of unity, as the 2022 decision does.

Issue 2: Threatens the Gospel

Making a specific interpretation of unchastity confessional presents the most serious problem, a challenge to the gospel of grace as articulated in the Reformed confessions. Synod followed the HSR in shifting the gospel sequence from one of grace to one of duty. In its discussion of confessional status, the HSR stated, “At the heart of the gospel is the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.” (p. 147). This misses the gospel by a degree, but a dangerous degree.

The heart of the gospel is, first, the declaration of God's acceptance and adoption of unworthy sinners through the merits of Christ Jesus¹, and, based on this prior gracious acceptance and new identity, follows the imperative call to sanctification, a life of repentance and faith (cf. Galatians 2:16; 3:2). Elsewhere the HSR rightly notes the heart of the gospel, that "the starting point for Christian reflection on sexual morality is our identity in Christ ... First and foremost we are children of God, "heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29), and we are called to practice our sexuality in accord with this purpose." (p. 27).

The necessary sequence of the gospel is: first, acceptance by God and adoption in Christ, and then a call to a changed life²; the priority of grace, then a life of gratitude. Reverse this sequence and you have constructed something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Issue 3: Impedes Pastoral Care

The HSR contains helpful pastoral guidance for receiving, enfolding, and caring for LGBTQ+ persons in the church. For example, the report highlights the need for "nonjudgmental presence and support" (p. 52), hospitality ("Individuals who identify as transgender or have gender dysphoria need to be received without judgment as persons made in God's image, valuable to God as they are. In other words, they need to be welcomed with unconditional love;" p. 86), and acceptance ("Accept those who have already fully transitioned (i.e., have had hormones and surgery) as they are;" p. 87). In addition, the report calls the church to establish relationships with believers who hold to different views on same-sex marriage ("Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who affirm same-sex marriage ... Encourage their relationship with Jesus and affirm them for continuing in their faith;" p. 118).

In these statements, the report assumes a spectrum of conviction regarding human sexuality among confessing believers in the church. It recognizes that the church is a field filled with both wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24-30) in our sexual expressions and convictions - this is the pastoral context of the church³. However, the confessional status of the

¹ Belgic Confession art. 21 "Therefore, we rightly say with Paul that we 'know nothing but Jesus and him crucified'; we consider all things as 'dung for the excellences of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' We find comfort in his wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice, once made, which renders believers perfect forever."

Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 60 describes how we are righteous: "without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is accept this gift with a believing heart."

² Belgic Confession art 24, "These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable to God, since they are all sanctified by his grace. Yet they do not count toward our justification - for by faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do good works."

³ Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 114 also recognizes this context, noting that "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience."

interpretation of unchastity places an impediment to the provision of the important acts of pastoral care called for in the HSR. In fact, this confessional boundary around membership in the church prevents pastoral care from functioning in the first place and removes the communal context needed for the development of Christian holiness.

Issue 4: Unnecessary expansion of the scope of necessary beliefs for membership

Synod's decision concerning the confessional status of its interpretation of unchastity adds to the scope of necessary beliefs for membership in the Christian Reformed Church, as stated in the Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 22:

“Q. What then must a Christian believe?”

A. All that is promised us in the gospel, a summary of which is taught us in the articles of our universal and undisputed Christian faith.” (i.e., the Apostles Creed)

Synod's decision creates an additional criterion for confessing members, thereby adding a barrier to many people's membership and participation (cf. John 20:31; Acts 16:30-34). Additionally, it complicates and creates confusion about important parts of the life of the church, including communion and baptism. May people who disagree with this interpretation still make profession of faith or be baptized, present children for baptism, or serve as office-bearers? Should the people who have not come to a place of agreement with the HSR's perspective and synod's interpretation be barred from the Lord's Supper? Would someone who at one point rejects this interpretation and leaves the CRC but later recants and accepts this teaching then need to be re-baptized or make a new profession of faith?

The Church is what it is only through a living relationship with the living Lord. The essence of the church is in the union of the whole church with Christ, not in the personal character of certain select Christians. The holiness of the Church is not derived from the virtue of its individual members but is derived from the holy nature of its Head, Jesus Christ.

Issue 5: The list of proscribed sexual practices is selective and pastorally inadequate

Synod's list of sexual practices deemed to be violations of the confessions encompasses adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex. This list targets several specific activities but does not mention (except by omission) other practices that have historically been regarded as unchaste (e.g. masturbation). Most importantly, this list fails to address the matter of unchastity within the marriage relationship, such as marital rape or the withholding of sexual relations by a marriage partner.

Heidelberg Catechism Q and A 109 wisely allows for broader pastoral application, directing Christians to the heart as the wellspring of all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires (see also Matthew 5:27-30).

Issue 6: Unity of the Church

The unity of the church was a great concern for our Lord Jesus (John 17), and this decision is unnecessarily divisive, effecting a separation within the communion of saints that proceeds beyond the unity that “believers one and all ... share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts.” (Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 55). Our Lord cautions against such inclinations to judge and separate, instead leaving any weeding out to God’s final judgment (Matt. 13:28-30, 40-43).

Overture:

The Council of ClearView Christian Reformed Church overtures Classis Toronto to overture Synod 2023: to remove the confessional status granted to the interpretation of the word “unchastity” in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 108

Grounds:

- 1) Synod 2022’s decision runs contrary to the 1975 Synod report which states that interpretations of confessions do not themselves have confessional status.
- 2) Synod 2022’s decision threatens the core of the gospel.
- 3) Synod 2022’s decision is an impediment to Pastoral Care.
- 4) Synod 2022’s decision unwisely expands the scope of necessary belief for full membership in the CRC in a manner that creates barriers and confusion.
- 5) Synod 2022’s decision selectively and inadequately addresses issues of unchastity.
- 6) Synod 2022’s decision unnecessarily threatens the unity of the CRCNA.

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